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WORKING WITH HOMELESS FAMILIES: STRATEGIES FOR SCHOOL PERSONNEL

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This pamphlet contains some ideas for school personnel who are working with homeless children and their families; included are ways that teachers, school administrators, and counselors can help meet the needs of homeless children in their school system. The following suggestions were gathered from school personnel in other states, from recent literature on homeless families, and from personal contact with service providers who are currently involved with homeless families. We encourage you to use or adapt any of these to fit your situation and hope these suggestions will help you respond to the unique needs of homeless children.

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1.) Find out if there are any shelters or hotels/motels housing homeless families in your area. If so, contact shelter personnel (directors, family life advocates) and establish a shelter-school communication system. Discuss the policies and programs of your school with shelter staff and ask them to explain their program to you. Ask shelters to inform you when a child moves into their facility and to let you know when children are planning to move out of the shelter.

2.) Have a "personnel exchange" day with local shelters or service providers who are working with families living in hotels/motels. Have personnel from your school "shadow" a member of the shelter staff for a day to gain an insight into their role and responsibilities. Vice versa - have a member of the shelter staff shadow a member of the school's staff for a day. This exchange will help both parties understand how the other operates and can lead to shelter/school collaboration.

3.) Send a copy of all newsletters, notes, school calendars, etc. to the shelters to keep them informed of school activities. Advertise in the hotels/motels and shelters - put up posters which describe special programs the district or school has to offer (e.g., adult education, vocational education, youth programs, etc.).

4.) Try to work out an agreement with the shelter where teachers can make home visits to the parents there. At the initial meeting discuss

how the parents can be involved with their child's education and the role the school plays in that child's life.

5.) Set up home-reading programs in the shelter. Donate books and, if possible, a specified number of volunteer hours to be spent organizing and running the reading program.

6.) Volunteer to be an after-school tutor for children in shelters and hotels/motels. Work with the shelter to organize the program. Ask local libraries to donate space for the tutoring sessions.

7.) Have one homeless liaison/contact person in each school and district for shelter personnel, social workers, and homeless families to call as questions/problems arise. Give the name and telephone number of this person to local service agencies and shelters.

8.) Have school volunteers go into hotels/motels and shelters to talk first-hand with families; they can help parents enroll their children in school, explain school policies, describe upcoming activities, and give parents ideas on how they can become involved in school activities.

9.) Sponsor a "materials/clothing drive" to collect school supplies (crayons, pencils, paper, glue, etc.) and clothing to have on hand at the beginning of the school year. Homeless parents may not be able to afford these materials so having them available will prevent children from starting the school year without the needed supplies - and will avoid any embarrassment they may feel in not having these materials.

10.) Do the children in your classroom celebrate their birthdays by bringing in treats (cupcakes, cookies, etc.)? If so, keep in mind that homeless children probably will not have the resources to bring in such goodies. Perhaps other arrangements could be made to provide treats on their birthdays.

11.) Keep in mind that children living in hotels/motels and shelters may not have access to a television set - or there may be ten other people sharing the set. Therefore, homework assignments that involve watching TV may not be completed.

12.) Have a buddy system. When a homeless child moves into the school have another child be his/her buddy to show him/her around the school, introduce him/her to people, etc.

13.) Children in shelters and hotels/motels may not have any physical space in which to do their homework. By providing them with their own "transportable desk" (decorated flat box, clipboard, notebook) you will give them a special place to do their homework.

14.) Ensure that homeless children have an opportunity to participate in school-wide and after-school activities. Will the homeless children be excluded from such activities because they lack transportation, appropriate dress (costumes), etc.?

15.) Develop a set of quickly administered screening instruments that an aide or volunteer can administer that might give teachers immediate information about the abilities of the student being placed.

16.) Incorporate classroom survival skills (i.e., listening, following instructions, asking for help, etc.), social skills and self-esteem components into your curriculum. Such skills can help bolster a child's self esteem and give him/her a sense of belonging.

17.) Homeless children have little or no structure in their everyday lives. Provide them with this structure in the classroom by keeping a consistent daily schedule with clear, concise rules. If you plan to have a substitute or make any changes in the classroom routine let them know ahead of times. Include transition procedures.

18.) Provide "closure" for homeless children if you know they are planning to leave your school. Provide them with a special time to clean out their cubbies or lockers and say good-bye to their friends and teachers. Give them a copy of their transfer card and IEP (if they have one) when they leave.

19.) Make sure the school breakfast and lunch programs are available without barriers and stigma to homeless children.

20.) Put "Homeless Children and Their Families" as a topic for one of your district's upcoming inservices. Contact Leedia Macomber, Coordinator of the Office for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth, Mass. Dept of Education (617-770-7493), if you are interested in having the Dept of Education present such an inservice program.